

# Taking Toll of the Bells of Duxbury

By JOE SHEA

In the history and settlement of Duxbury, a variety of means was used to get the attention of citizens. The traditional bell quickly became the most popular and effective device.

I began to get curious about the bells of Duxbury and quickly found that there had once been bells everywhere. Most churches had them, the fire stations and rolling stock had them, and the trains that came through town on a regular schedule had them. The sailing ships in the harbor were all equipped with bells as were most of the many farms.

All of the bells in town are of the western European style, meaning the shape is nearly identical to the bells established in England and parts of Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. They are sometimes called "English" style. Both European and Russian bells are variations on the familiar tulip shape, although the Russian style bell was not meant to swing as the English bells do. With three exceptions all bells referred to are of cast bronze.

## St. Margaret's Convent

The bell on the roof in a little belfry at St. Margaret's Chapel on Washington Street has the honor of being the smallest bell in service in town. The original bell weighed approximately 35 pounds and is of indeterminate age and origins; the clapper rotted off and the bell is no longer

by pulling the rope or you could reach up and move the clapper by hand. The bell performed yeoman's service for many years and the sound of it was well known in the community. The bell was made by the C.S. Bell Company of Hillsboro Ohio and weighed about 75 pounds. That bell was removed from service 25 years ago and subsequently found its way into private hands.

## Pilgrim Church

Further down Washington Street is the Pilgrim Church. In the open steeple, and visible from the street, is a traditional swinging bell that is bolted at the top to a cast iron frame. It no longer swings, though it could. The bell wheel, around which the bell rope would be wound, is no longer there. The iron spokes of the wheel are there. There is a tolling hammer in place on the outside of the bell.

That bell is 38 inches across the bottom and 27 inches high. According to formulas from the Whitechapel Foundry in London, the Pilgrim Church bell weighs close to 1,050 pounds. The bell was cast by the William Blake Bell Company of Boston in 1896. In 1976 Pilgrim Church installed a cartridge tape player. Both the clock and tape player are analog. One transistorized 150-watt amplifier broadcasts recorded carillon music through two large speakers on the bell deck above the town clock. The selection of



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in service. It is stored in the workshop at the convent.

The bell in use now was custom cast in England for the Sisters of St. Margaret while their new convent was under construction in 1923. The four-building convent complex was located at Louisburg Square on Boston's Beacon Hill. In the early 1990s St. Margaret's disposed of their Beacon Hill assets, and the bell was moved to the new chapel in Roxbury. There wasn't an adequate belfry in that chapel, however, so the bell was sent to Duxbury and installed in the chapel after some minor modifications to the belfry. If that Louisburg Square address caught your attention, it might be because Senator John Kerry is the current resident of the former convent.

The 1923 bronze bell weighs 132 pounds. It has a traditional wheel and rope configuration and swings in the historical fashion.

St. Margaret's used the property on Washington Street as a summer camp for city kids from 1912 until the late 1970s. It served as a summer Convent until the mid 1990s. During that time, attendees were scattered about the property and needed to be called together from time to time. There was a bell, made of steel and mounted on a single post in the yard. It could be rung

music can vary with the seasons.

#### **Universalist Church**

The parking lot of what is now the Winsor House restaurant on Washington Street was the location of the Universalist Church of Duxbury, the southeast corner to be precise. This is the church with which Mary Livingston was connected. It was built in 1826 and closed in 1866. Dismantled, the church, was shipped to Scituate where it became a private residence. The Universalist Church had a bell that sounded the Angelus and was well remembered by local residents. There is no other information about that bell or its fate.

#### **St. John's**

In the open steeple and visible from Washington Street is the bell, a relatively recently arrival in town. This bell weighs 550 pounds and swings in the traditional manner. The bell is mounted on a cast iron frame bolted to the bell deck. Installed in the fall of 1999, the bell was rung for the first time here in celebration of the new millennium at midnight on December 31, 1999. The celebration was complete with fireworks. This bell was cast by the McShane Bell Foundry of Baltimore, Maryland in 1928 for another church in western Massachusetts. The bell sound

a tone of C. It has wheel that is about 52 inches in diameter. A second rope is available to allow tolling the bell by moving a separate hammer. When installed, this was the first bell in St. John's 175-year history.

#### **Partridge Academy**

On the present site of Town Hall was the schoolhouse named Partridge Academy. The bronze bell was installed in the belfry in 1843 when the building was erected. The building burned to the ground in 1933 and the bell was destroyed; the only trace of it is the wrought iron clapper, now held by the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society. Society Executive Director Patrick Browne, in response to my request, searched the holdings of the DR&HS and located the clapper in the attic at the King Caesar House. It was not listed in their inventory. That clapper has clear evidence of having been in a serious fire and has traces of the melted bronze of the bell imbedded in the surface. The clapper shows evidence of very heavy usage. This could reflect the pounding delivered by over-exuberant students. There is no information as to who cast the bell but it likely would have weighed between 200-250 pounds.

#### **First Parish Church**

This George Handel Holbrook bell is the heaviest swinging bell in Duxbury. At 1,600 pounds plus the frame, it is a testimony to sturdy construction of some wooden steeples. This bell also has a tolling capability from a digital control unit. It is also the oldest bell in Duxbury. It is the only bronze bell mounted with cannon loops. These loops are often seen on old cannons where they provide a place to pass ropes through to hold every thing together. Late 19th century designs reduced the need for the loops and more modern bells now are directly bolted to the yoke. Because of the cannon loops, the wooden yoke so often used on bells was practical. The preserved wooden yoke of the 1840's Holbrook Bell as well as the tolling hammer are on display in the vestibule at the First Parish Church. This bell was the subject of an extensive story in

parts in January 2006.

#### **High Street**

##### **Methodist Church**

The bell that has traveled furthest directly from the foundry to Duxbury is the bell in the closed steeple of the High Street Methodist Church. That bell was cast by the Naylor-Vickers Foundry of Sheffield, England in 1866. The casting of small bells of steel had been developed a few years before but it was Naylor-Vickers that figured out how to cast a large bell out of steel.

This steel bell is 32 inches high and has a mouth of 36 inches. The bell is attached to a cast iron frame, which supports the wheel or what is left of it. Just as with the Pilgrim Church the wheel has deteriorated to the point it needed to be removed. The four cast iron spokes are still in place and the bell rope is attached to one of them. This bell weighs about 750 pounds in steel against about 1100 pounds in bronze and is not capable of being swung "over the top" in its present condition. This type of bell is subject to the corrosive effects of the environment and needs regular painting. It is more vulnerable to rust than a bronze bell. When new, the bell sported a coat of gray paint from the factory. This bell is the only one in town that is mounted inside an enclosed belfry. This will provide some protection from the elements and it will limit the distance the bell will be heard.

One unique feature of these steel bells is that they are all cast with a unique serial number. The High Street Bell has number 4622 cast into its shoulder. Another unusual component was a set of steel springs mounted inside the bell to prevent the clapper from resting on the bell after it was struck, which would produce a disagreeable tone.

#### **Holy Family Church**

In 1865 the Cornerstone Baptist Church at 2114 Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge was in an expanding mode and they were building a new 95-foot high steeple. The Church commissioned the Hooper Foundry to create a worthy bell. At 2,800 pounds it was worthy. It was a swinging bell and could go all the way "over the top" if care was not exercised. It rang in the new millennium (1900), the end of several wars, and marked significant events in Cambridge life.

In 1970 the Church fell victim to arson and was substantially destroyed. The bell survived, to the amazement of many. Bells usually are destroyed in fires at churches because they are often located over the worst heat. The Baptist Church relocated to Belmont and donated the bell to the local

found its way into the Cambridge DPW storage yard where it lay for 15 years tucked away behind a shed. Eventually it came time to clean up the yard and the bell was rediscovered.

The Archdiocese of Boston was asked if they needed a bell. It turned out that the new Holy Family Church in Duxbury was in the design stage and it was a natural. The bell and clapper were shipped off to the Verdin Company in Cincinnati, Ohio for modification and cleaning. The architects designed an open 65-foot tall steeple that would suspend the bell in a very open way, but it could not be allowed to swing due to excessive forces on the structures. It does ring on demand; the internal clapper is electronically driven by a digital clock. No bell ropes and no pulleys. To access the bell one would have to climb the roof.

At 2,800 pounds, the "Hooper" is the heaviest bell in Duxbury by over 1,000 pounds. The Hooper Foundry, owned by Henry N. Hooper, was also well known for having cast civil war cannons for the military called "Napoleons" because the Emperor Napoleon had employed them in his wars. Hooper went on to cast bronze chandeliers and statuary. Many a cannon was melted down after the Civil War to make such things as church bells and statuary. He became well known for his chandeliers and they are much sought after. The Hooper Foundry eventually became the William Blake Foundry, which cast the bell for the Pilgrim Church.

The Holy Family bell is credited with holding the steeple in place during a serious wind-storm. The substantial weight of that bell served to anchor the steeple until a crane could be brought in to repair the steeple.

#### *USS Duxbury Bay*

Holding the prize for the most traveled bell in Duxbury is the ship's bell of the *U.S.S. Duxbury Bay* presently mounted in a fixed position inside Town Hall. It sounded "church call" to call all hands to church services and tolled during burials at sea. When it sounded on a Sunday morning the "church pennant" would be hoisted to a position above the United States Flag for the duration of services. The church pennant is the only flag or pennant allowed to be flown above the national flag. That pennant had the practical effect of notifying someone from a distance it was time to be observant. The church pennant was a long pointed triangular shape in white with dark blue cross on it.

The *Duxbury Bay* bell weighs about 100 pounds and was never meant to swing. The ship's bell is always kept highly polished to reflect the general material condition of the ship. All other bronze bells are allowed to develop a patina which should not be removed.